EC & I 809 – Reading Response #6 (Chapters 10 & 11)

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**Who are the groups or individuals who affect or are affected by an evaluation study?**

* Sponsor –agency/individual that authorizes the evaluation and provides funding
* Client – specific agency or individual who requests the evaluation
* Stakeholder – can be sponsors and clients, program managers, staff, recipients of services, etc.
* Audience – individuals, groups and agencies who have an interest in the evaluation

**What are some considerations to be made before an evaluation?**

* Determining and understanding the purpose of the evaluation is the most important decision to be made before the evaluation begins
* The evaluator must: listen closely to reasons for initiation, talk to other stakeholders about their information needs and perceptions of the study to ensure the evaluation is appropriately targeted and useful
* Two-way communication is essential to evaluation

**What are some uses of evaluation?**

* Acceptable Informational Uses – direct information use, educate others about alternative ways to make decisions, stimulate dialogue among stakeholders, raise awareness of program issues or stakeholder views
* Non-informational uses - delaying a decision, ducking responsibility, public relations (draw visibility to a program), fulfilling grant requirements

**What are conditions under which evaluation studies are inappropriate?**

* Would produce trivial information
* Results will not be used (ex. DARE program)
* Cannot yield useful, valid information
* Type of evaluation is premature for the stage of the program
* Propriety of the evaluation is doubtful – strain or violate professional principles

**How to determine whether a program is evaluable?**

* Clarify the intended program model or theory
* Examine the program in implementation to determine whether is matches or could achieve the program objectives or goals
* Explore different evaluation approaches to determine how well they meet stakeholders’ information needs and if feasible to implement
* Agree on evaluation priorities and intended uses of the study
* Evaluations could be postponed if: consensus cannot be achieved, actions differ greatly from the model, stakeholders cannot achieve consensus, desired evaluation plan is not feasible, intended uses are too ambiguous

**What are some differences between internal and external evaluators?**

* External Evaluator Advantages: are more impartial and objective, more credible to outside audiences, enables an agency to draw on evaluation expertise, fresh outside perspective, program personnel may be more inclined to reveal sensitive information to an outsider, can feel more comfortable presenting unpopular information
* Internal Evaluator Advantages: have more knowledge of the program model and its history, more familiar with stakeholders and their interests and concerns, know the history, will remain in the organization after the evaluation, serve as an advocate for use of findings

**What are examples of evaluator competencies?**

* Ability to work with audiences to formulate key evaluation questions
* Skills in research design, data collection, analysis and interpretation
* Planning and management skills to carry out a study in a timely, cost-effective way
* Ability to conduct the study in an ethical manner
* Communication skills to convey results to varying audiences
* Sensitivity to work with a variety of stakeholders in a manner that meets their needs and facilitates the use of results

**What are some approaches to hiring an evaluator?**

* Selection methods should be matched to the knowledge and skills needed for the job (Ex. Resume, interview, references)

**How to analyze the evaluation context?**

* During the planning stage, it is essential that the evaluator identify all the various stakeholders and audiences for the evaluation
* Involving stakeholders: helps ensure that the evaluation addresses appropriate concerns, assists the evaluator in identifying potential users, helps reduce anxieties about the evaluation, allows the evaluator to learn how different groups perceive the program
* Evaluation plan – includes questions that address the information needs of several different stakeholders groups
* Important audiences may be involved in an advisory group and consulted frequently
* As data plans are formulated and data is collected, need to consider what information each audience needs and will use
* Program description – is a description of the critical elements of the program to be evaluated, typically includes: goals and objectives, critical components and activities, descriptions of the target audience
  + Poor or incomplete descriptions can lead to faulty judgments
  + Is a fundamental step in gaining a clear sense of what an evaluation is about
* Program theory – is a type of program description that consists of normative theory (stakeholders perspectives of the program as it should be, its goals and outcomes, its interventions and rationale) and causative theory (makes use of existing research to describe potential outcomes of the program)

**What are other considerations to make when deciding on an evaluation?**

* To describe a program fully follow three approaches: review existing documents, interview various individuals involved (ex. managers, staff, clients), observe the program in action (will often reveal variations between how the program is running and how it is intended to run)
* availability and capability of evaluation personnel – program staff or volunteers may be used to reduce costs (must understand their responsibilities in completing the evaluation and as a member of the evaluation team, must be trained in the skills required to do the tasks, follow protocols and avoid biases)
* financial resources needed – budgets could be the last step in planning, should remain flexible
* technological and other resources– could use existing testing or services to cut down on costs, email, conference calls, videos or photographs of activities, reports posted on websites can also cut down on expenses
* How the political context affects the approach, the nature of the information collected and the interpretation and use of the results

**How to deal with different perceptions?**

* If relatively minor and reflect the values or position of the stakeholder, the evaluator can choose to learn from these different perceptions but not push toward consensus
* If major and occur among the primary audiences, evaluator should attempt to achieve some sort of consensus description before moving on, may establish a working group of differing audience members to reach an agreement on a program description and boundaries for the evaluation

**Part II – Reflection**

These two chapters were particularly useful to gaining understanding of the contexts and considerations to make when developing an evaluation. As one begins an evaluation not only is it crucial to have a clear idea of the intention of the evaluation, but also to ensure that you have an evaluator in place that is competent and able to make proper determinations of the outcomes of the evaluation. As I am just beginning in my understanding of how the entire process works, the tables such as figure 10.3 (Checklist of Questions to Consider in Selecting an Evaluator) continue to provide me with a clearer picture. Of particular interest to me was the “Factors to Consider in Characterizing the Object of the Evaluation” (pages 204-205). I think that these questions raised by the authors will be particularly important to revisit when completing the evaluation review in upcoming weeks. These not only provide guidance, but also force one to consider the broad scope that an evaluation involves.

As a teacher, an idea threaded throughout the two chapters that struck me was the input and involvement of the evaluation’s audience. Although in a different context of evaluation, I try to include opinions and concerns of my students in the planning of their evaluations. I think that this gives them some ownership in the process and they tend to “buy in” more if they have some input. In much of the same regard, involvement of the different stakeholders in a program evaluation I can’t help to think would lead to better success of the implementation of any findings from the evaluation. I would be curious to see if there are any statistics to support or dispute my idea.

From my perspective and past experiences with evaluations, all audience members have had some input into evaluations but their opinions have had different weighting. For example, as I mentioned previously, our school is currently under review to become a grades 7 to 12 school rather than grades 10 to 12 as it is currently. Although there has been some disagreement of this objective from concerned stakeholders such as parents and though other ideas have been proposed with some supporting research, for example a grades 9 to 12 system, the plan has never been amended or really even taken into consideration those other alternatives. I often feel that some of these “input sessions” are really just to placate interested parties without really giving them any power in the decision making process.